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NEET crisis: The wound beneath the wound

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NEET crisis: The wound beneath the wound image:file

Why are twenty-two lakh people competing for what amounts to a few thousand seats in government medical colleges?

Have you observed how animal babies grow up mostly on their own? The young of almost every species are equipped by instinct to navigate the world their parents inhabited, because that world will not change significantly between one generation and the next. The human child is the single exception, and the exception is not incidental; it is the definition of the species. The human child must be raised, not merely kept alive and fed, but formed in full: given enough knowledge of itself to distinguish what draws it from where the crowd around it is headed. When that inner formation is absent, the child grows in the biological sense while remaining, in every sense that matters, as directionless as it was at the

beginning. A nation of such children, pointed at the nearest designated exit and told that the pointing is education, will produce what India has been producing, with increasing regularity, for decades. ^

On May 3, 2026, more than twenty-two lakh young Indians sat down to write the NEET-UG, the sole national examination for admission to undergraduate medical programmes, and on May 12 the National Testing Agency cancelled it. Investigations by the Rajasthan Special Operations Group had established that a circulated guess paper matched approximately ninety Biology and thirty Chemistry questions in the actual paper; the material had been sold across at least four states at prices ranging between thirty thousand and thirty lakh rupees. The CBI has registered an FIR, several arrests have been made, and a re-examination has been scheduled for June. Among those detained are two brothers from Rajasthan whose family's four NEET successes in 2025 were celebrated across coaching institute hoardings as a story of small-town discipline; they allegedly purchased the 2026 paper for thirty lakh rupees from a doctor in Gurugram. The family's arc, from national inspiration to active investigation in under a year, is not a story about two brothers' failure of character; it is a compressed portrait of a system that generates precisely the desperation under which such decisions are made.

This is not new, and the data makes it impossible to pretend otherwise. Over the seven years preceding 2026, more than seventy examination papers were leaked across fifteen states, affecting an estimated 1.7 crore students. A law enacted in 2024 prescribes five to ten years of imprisonment for organised paper leak crimes, with fines of up to one crore rupees; yet the arrests have continued, the examinations have continued, and the leaks have continued alongside them, each cycle arriving with its own FIRs, its own assurances, and its own fresh cohort who have arranged the preceding two years of their lives around a single date.

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An impartial investigation into the 2026 matter is not optional, and accountability where corruption is established must proceed without compromise. But the corruption the CBI has registered is a pimple; the blood that produced it has been circulating at this temperature for a very long time, and no FIR has ever been filed for that. Those who propose a new method of testing are not wrong; but the person who builds the new method is human, and the person who will corrupt it is the same human, and a changed format has never yet produced a changed intention.

The Crowd at the Exit

Why are twenty-two lakh people competing for what amounts to a few thousand seats in government medical colleges? This is the question the outrage cycle cannot bring itself to ask, because the answer implicates not the NTA but the culture that produced the crowd. The Indian candidate who appears for NEET has in most cases not chosen medicine out of any particular orientation toward it; she has chosen it because engineering, medicine, and civil service are the three roads her upbringing has lit, and this was the one visible from where she was standing; the question of whether any of them was actually hers to walk was never put to her, because the culture that directed her does not know how to put it. Her ego, pointed outward since before she had the vocabulary to question that direction, is not seeking a vocation; it is seeking scaffolding, something external, named, and socially defensible with which to fill the incompleteness it carries and has never been shown how to examine.

This is the condition on which the coaching industry has built its empire, now valued at approximately sixty thousand crore rupees and projected to reach one lakh thirty-three

thousand crores by 2028. Its foundational product is not examination preparation; it is a temporary container for an energy that has no genuine object. The student who spends two or three years in Kota or Mukherjee Nagar does not know what she wants from her life; she knows what her parents want, what the neighbours' children are doing and what the culture has classified as arrival. One candidate clears the examination and becomes the institute's hoarding; the hundred whose families' savings went the same way disappear from the prospectus, their years absorbed into what the industry neutrally terms its conversion ratio, by an enterprise that has never been asked to account for its aggregate outcomes, and never will be.

The Position That Was Always the Point

There is a distinction India's educational culture has never thought it necessary to draw. It is between the pursuit of something toward which the person is actually oriented, and the pursuit of something because the credential it confers will signal, to the world, that you have arrived. Both look identical from the outside, both involve years of preparation and real sacrifice, and the examination cannot distinguish between them because it was never designed to; from the inside, however, they move in opposite directions. Where there is actual inclination, the work and the worker are oriented toward the same object, and that engagement is its own kind of sustenance. Where the credential is the object, the work is always instrumental, a fuel burning in the IC engine of a desire whose actual destination is the position, the title, the social signal; and once the position is secured, the engine, having reached its destination, stops. Underlying this is something older than any examination board: the cultural arrangement that located dignity in designation rather than in labour, that sorted the population by what each stratum was permitted to be called rather than by what it was willing to do, and that survives, in thoroughly modern form, in the family that will spend thirty lakh rupees on a purchased paper rather than permit a child to find a path that carries no approvable title.

NCRB data for 2024 records 14,488 student suicides, rising at more than double the national average, 4.3 percent above the year before and 15.7 percent above 2020. Examination failure is recorded as a contributing cause in over two thousand of these deaths; Kota recorded twenty-nine suicides in 2023 alone, the most recent year for which city-level figures are confirmed. These are not the costs of ambition; they are the costs of a misdirection so total that the ego which has been steered away from any actual object finds, at the moment of failure, that there is nothing to return to, because the credential sought as a substitute for self-knowledge has not arrived, and the self-knowledge was never on offer in the first

place. And there is a further cost the data does not capture: the fifteen or twenty year old who watches the leak succeed absorbs a lesson not about one examination but about operating formula; that ego, once taught that advance requires fraud, carries the curriculum forward into every relationship.

The Subject That Was Never in Any Syllabus

The question of why this keeps happening is ultimately a question about what the country has been delivering as education and what it has consistently left out. Walk through what every Indian student has navigated: history, geography, Hindi, English, physics, chemistry, biology, mathematics. These subjects have real content and their study is not trivial. But one subject is conspicuously absent from every board and every coaching module: the subject of the one who is studying all the rest. Not moral science, which is something different and considerably thinner, but the subject of what drives the incompleteness that sends twenty-two lakh people to the same examination hall; of what it would mean to act from something other than the fear of falling behind the crowd; of what the ego actually is beneath the succession of credentials it has been trained to accumulate. There is no name for this subject in any official syllabus, and there has never been. The reason is not mysterious: the people who design syllabi were formed by the same system and carry the same absence. What they do not have they cannot transmit, and what they cannot transmit they do not notice is missing.

Any education that addresses the world without addressing the one who will inhabit it produces, at scale, exactly what the data above has been describing: young people who are technically trained and inwardly unequipped, egos full of acquired content and empty of the self-examination that might have made the content useful, a confusion that does not know it is confused and a suffering that cannot locate its own origin. The investigation into 2026 will produce arrests, possibly convictions, and a reformed NTA with a strengthened testing protocol; the twenty-two lakh students who sat on May 3 deserve nothing less. But the reformed examination will still fill its halls with candidates who do not know why they are there, whose years were arranged around a credential that was always standing in as a substitute for the self-knowledge that no curriculum, reformed or otherwise, has ever offered them. The pimple will return; the blood has not changed, and an investigation, however thorough, does not reach that far.

Acharya Prashant is a philosopher and author whose work centres on self-inquiry and its application to contemporary life.